

NCA  
VOC FOR PGM/FN  
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5961  
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/CAIRO

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# LEBANON FIGHTING

ANNCR:

THERE WAS MORE HEAVY FIGHTING IN THE LEBANESE CAPITAL OF BEIRUT OVER THE WEEKEND WITH FIERCE CLASHES BETWEEN CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN AND SYRIAN TROOPS OF THE ARAB LEAGUE PFACEKEEPING FORCE. FROM VOA'S MIDDLE EAST BUREAU, DOUGLAS ROBERTS SFNT THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

ONE-LONG TIME OBSERVER OF THE LEBANESE SITUATION COMPLAINED RECENTLY THAT HE CANNOT UNDERSTAND NEWS RFPORTS THAT SAY THE CIVIL WAR ENDED IN 1976. IT DID NOT END, HE SAID, IT WAS MERELY SUPRESSED. IT WAS IN NOVEMBER OF 1976 THAT AN ARAB LEAGUE PEACE-KEEPING FORCE DOMINATED BY SOME TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND SYRIAN TROOPS MOVED IN BETWEEN THE BATTLELINFs AND PUT A HALT TO SOME NINETEEN MONTHS OF BLOODY FACTIONAL WARFARE.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE PEACEKEEPING UNIT SPARKED RELIEF AND EVEN EUPHORIA IN BEIRUT, SCARRED BY ARTILLERY BATTLES AND FIERCE CLASHES BETWEEN CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN, THE ALLIANCE OF LEFTIST LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN FORCES. BUT THE EUPHORIA DID NOT LOST LONG. SPORADIC FIRE-FIGHTS AND ASSASSINATIONS IN THE SEA-SIDE CAPITAL KEPT TENSIONS HIGH. AND THERE WAS NO REAL PROGRESS IN EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE BASIC PROBLEMS THAT SPARKED THE CIVIL WAR. AT THE SAME TIME THERE WAS CONTINUING WARFARE IN THE SOUTH OF THE COUNTRY ALONG THE ISRAELI BORDER. AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SAID IT CREATED AN ATMOSPHERE THAT PREVENTED IMPLEMENTATION OF LARGE-SCALE RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS.

THEN, LAST MARCH, ISRAELI FORCES INVADED THE SOUTH TO DRIVE PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS AWAY FROM THE BORDER ZONF. THREE MONTHS

LATER, THE ISRAELIS WITHDREW AFTER UNITED NATIONS PEACE KEEPING FORCES MOVED INTO THE AREA. THAT PART OF THE COUNTRY IS NOW RELATIVELY QUIET, AT LEAST BY LEBANESE STANDARDS, BUT THE SITUATION IN THE REST OF THE COUNTRY, PARTICULARLY BEIRUT, HAS DETERIORATED SHARPLY OVER THE PAST TWO MONTHS. AND IT IS OPPOSITION TO SYRIA'S ROLE IN LEBANON BY THE COUNTRY'S MILITANT CHRISTIAN LEADERS THAT IS CAUSING THE GREATEST CONCERN.

SYRIAN TROOPS AND CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN WERE DEFACTO ALLIES DURING THE LATTER STAGES OF THE CIVIL WAR WHEN BOTH FOUGHT AGAINST LEFTIST LEBANESE AND PALFSTINIAN FORCES. BUT SINCE THEN, RELATIONS BETWEEN DAMASCUS AND SOME OF THE TOP CHRISTIAN LEADERS HAVE GRADUALLY WORSENERD.

LAST FEBRUARY, SYRIAN TROOPS AND CHRISTIAN MILITIAMEN CLASHED IN A BEIRUT SUBURB. THEY FOUGHT AGAIN IN APRIL IN THE SAME AREA -- A RESIDENTIAL DISTRICT CALLED AIN RUMANNAH. AND AGAIN THIS PAST WEEKEND THE CLASHES BEGAN IN AIN RUMANNAH.

THIS TIME THEY SPREAD TO THE CENTER OF THE CITY IN WHAT WAS CLEARLY THE WORST OUTBREAK IN BEIRUT SINCE THE PEACE-KEEPING TROOPS ARRIVED IN THE CAPITAL.

TOP CHRISTIAN LEADERS HAVE CHARGED THAT SYRIA PROVOKED THE CLASHES AND SOME ARE NOW OPENLY CALLING FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN FORCES IN LEBANON. BUT DAMASCUS GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS HAVE MAINTAINED THAT THE SYRIAN FORCES ARE ACTING UNDER THE DIRECT ORDERS OF THE BEIRUT GOVERNMENT, LED BY PRESIDENT ELIA SARKIS.

THE WORSENING SITUATION HAS PROVOKED A SPLIT IN THE CHRISTIAN RANKS. FORMER PRESIDENT SULEIMAN FRANIAH HAS REFUSED TO JOIN HIS ERSTWHILE ALLIES IN OPPOSITION TO THE SYRIAN PRESENCE. MISTER FRANIAH IS WIDELY CONSIDERED TO BE ONE OF THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT'S

STRONGESTSUPPORTERS IN LEBANON. AND LAST MONTH THERE WERE CLASHES IN NORTHERN LEBANON BETWEEN GUNMEN LOYAL TO THE FORMER PRESIDENT AND UNITS OF THE MAIN CHRISTIAN MILITIA ORGANIZATION -- THE PHALANGISTS.

THERE ARE FEW OPTIMISTS IN BEIRUT AT PRESENT, AND THE SAFEST COURSE FOR PUNDITS (OBSERVERS) IS CLEARLY TO PREDICT FURTHER VIOLENCE AND BLOODSHED. BUT THERE ARE SOME IN BEIRUT WHO BELIEVE THAT WHILE PERIODIC CLASHES ARE LIKELY FOR SOME TIME TO COME, THE SITUATION WILL GRADUALLY IMPROVE AS THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT INTENSIFIES EFFORTS TO ASSERT ITS AUTHORITY.

GH/PY